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ABSTRACT

One of a series of practitioner-oriented newsletters, the document provides elementary school principals with strategies for developing a school discipline code. The article recommends: (1) developing a written statement of school discipline policy; (2) launching the discipline policy at the beginning of the school year; (3) ensuring that standards and rules accurately reflect the school's overall philosophy of education; (4) preventing discipline problems by creating a positive classroom environment; (5) striving toward an understanding between teachers and students; and, as a last resort, (6) involving resource people and parents and trying a variety of problem-solving approaches with students. In conclusion, the article summarizes that a combination of positive reinforcement and limit setting provide the ideal conditions for a successful discipline policy. (LH)

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DEVELOPING A DISCIPLINE CODE IN YOUR SCHOOL

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Developing a Discipline Code in Your School

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Sam Foster is principal of the Powell and Petworth schools in Washington D.C. If you call that city's Board of Education and ask for names of elementary school principals who have the reputation of being effective disciplinarians, Sam Foster's is a name you will be given.

Foster would agree with recent studies that have found that first-rate schools—ones that, among other things, are not ridden with discipline problems—are led by strong principals, but notes that principals are not magicians. They cannot reach into their bag of tricks and bring about instant reform. It takes time and continual attention

"Several years ago I was principal of a middle school in New Jersey," Foster recalls. "It was the roughest school in the county. When I got there the kids were carrying knives. There were no standards. When I left, it was livable, but that's about all. We were still a couple of years away from where we needed to be."

Along with time, the principal also needs leeway—freedom to make important decisions. Foster, NAESP's state representative from the District of Columbia, says that he could have done more to make that New Jersey school effective if he had been free to transfer some of the staff, but that "the administration wouldn't allow me to make decisions of that kind."

A study done at the University of Pittsburgh (conducted by Barbara Sizemore, former superintendent of the District of Columbia public schools, and funded by the National Institute of Education) echoes Foster's feelings about the need for freedom to take necessary action. The Pittsburgh study noted that, as an alternative, principals of high-achieving schools typically find ways—including deliberate failure at times to remember selected rules—to get rid of teachers who don't fit in with goals and plans for their schools. By arranging for the transfer of these teachers, strong principals ensure that their staffs are composed of like-minded educators. Most principals feel, however, that a more preferable route to the same end lies in cooperative actions and negotiations at the superintendent level.

Although time and freedom to mold a team are basic in setting up good discipline procedures, muscle is not. As was noted in NAESP's *School Management Handbook* (Number 1, September 1981) the effective principal is rarely a "strict disciplinarian." More often he or she is "liked and respected but not feared; is willing to impose punishment when necessary but fairly, firmly, and consistently; and generates the feeling that he or she cares for every kid in the school."

Needed: Written discipline codes

Developing a written statement of the school's discipline code is an essential component of a sound overall discipline program. This written expression of the school's philosophy and standards should be the collaborative effort of everyone who is to be affected by it—above all, the school's teachers. While the basic tenets may be originated by the principal, it is crucial that teachers play a significant role in shaping and refining them. Staff members will surely be more interested in applying rules that they themselves have developed than in carrying out orders handed down from on high with no regard to their day-to-day experience.

It is practically impossible for a disciplinary program to succeed, writes Alfred Alschuler in *School Discipline: A Socially Literate Solution,* unless teachers give it their wholehearted support. Because it would be awkward to have meeting after meeting with every teacher in the school, Alschuler opts for the appointment of a disciplinary policy committee to work on behalf of teachers and report back to them at appropriate stages. If the teachers are represented by a union, that organization will also need to be consulted.

Involving students at this stage, especially those at the elementary level, would be useful but is not crucial, since the immediate goal is to agree on written standards—concepts that few elementary school youngsters would be able to articulate. They *are* able, however, to grasp the basic principles involved and can surely understand that the classroom will become chaotic unless certain rules of conduct are devised.

Thus, says Alschuler, "Teachers, with students, need to name, analyze, and transform the formal and informal rules governing behavior in the classroom and define what is desirable and what the rewards will be for good performance."

Involving parents in developing a discipline code is almost as desirable as having teachers participate, but is of course harder to arrange, particularly where parents do not see themselves as being really involved in their children's schooling. Many principals have found it useful to organize a parents' committee—in cooperation with the PTA, if the school has one—to represent and report regularly to parents as a whole. Such communication is of crucial importance in establishing the home as a base of support for the school's discipline program.

A basic discipline code having been developed—from a first draft written by the principal and thereafter refined on the basis of suggestions from teachers and parents and perhaps students—the next step is to ensure that all concerned, especially teachers, understand how the system is to work. Such understanding can be achieved most effectively through workshops that give teachers experience in applying the system to common classroom problems.

Timing: A key to success

Another important consideration is timing. The chances of success for any discipline program are greatly improved if it is launched at the beginning of the school year. Those first days of school establish patterns of student behavior, which—whether appropriate or the reverse—are difficult to change.

In fact, planning and designing a discipline program should begin many months prior to the target date for its implementation. It should be firmly in place when the doors open, so that a strong overall sense of order and clear consistency of policy may be established throughout the school immediately.

Contrary to what some might suppose, the greatest contribution toward getting the program off to a solid start may be expected to come not from the eager, enthusiastic newcomers to the staff but from the older hands—those who have been around the track a few times and have acquired a sense of practical priorities. In *The Education of Teachers: A Look Ahead,* Howey and Garner note that first-year teachers tend to begin content activity more quickly than experienced teachers. And this appears to be a mistake.

Experienced teachers, the authors say, use the first days of school to get students (and themselves) oriented. They make it a point to get acquainted with the children, to chat with them and explore their feelings and reactions and aspirations. That approach tends not only to create a sense of sympatico but also to provide the teacher an opportunity to make a clear, specific, unthreatening statement of the rules the students will be expected to follow, and what the consequences for failing to do so will be. As the occasion arises, such teachers typically make it a practice—especially during the start of the

school year—to point out to students instances of appropriate as contrasted with inappropriate conduct.

These teachers spend considerable time thinking about the rules they are going to ask students to abide by, and they feel strongly that adhering to those rules is very important both as a matter of providing students with optimum opportunity to benefit from the classroom, and, more simply, in order to create an environment where teaching and learning can take place.

Discipline as part of the total school program

Whatever standards or rules are chosen, they should accurately reflect the school's overall philosophy of education. Every member of the staff should be comfortable with them. Neither the principal nor any teacher should have a feeling of strangeness or reluctance in enforcing them. As necessary, each rule should be modified and remodified until it is as natural in the classroom as a lesson in grammar or addition.

Bruce Haslim, research associate at the National Institute of Education, notes: "Everything I see and read says that you should establish discipline as a part of the overall school program. It should not be separate. So, ideally, you would establish a set of learning goals for the school and *then* talk about what you need to do by way of discipline to support them. For instance, the choice of an open learning environment versus a more traditional approach would have a real impact on the nature of the disciplinary standards you would establish."

Sam Foster concurs: "I think the objectives you adopt in your school define whether a particular behavior is a discipline problem or not. If you don't have a rule that children have to stay in their seats all the time, then getting out of a seat is not a discipline problem. One thing we try to do is to see if we can omit rules that relate only to school rather than real life."

Herbert Kohl, writing in *On Teaching*, takes the question one step further, and puts forth the following rules:

1. No persons (students, teachers, or other adults) are to be allowed to injure or bully another, or to deliberately injure themselves.

2. No one is to be allowed to interfere with or prevent others from working.

3. No one is to be allowed to destroy any student's work or classroom material.

Admittedly, these propositions are broad and seem to cover worst-case possibilities, yet they can be thought of as a schoolhouse equivalent of the Bill of Rights: subject to interpretation but fundamentally reasonable. Indeed, as a framework for thinking out discipline issues, one of their chief attractions is their avoidance of the endless detail that is characteristic of many contemporary statements of school discipline standards, which, Bruce Haslim observes wryly, "read more like municipal codes than anything else."

Under Kohl's rubric there is room for the teacher's personal style, while students should have no trouble understanding what is intended. And that is a crucial task, according to Kohl: helping students understand the rules by which they are expected to abide.

It should be done, Kohl suggests, in as positive a way as possible. "One year," he wrote, "I made the mistake of beginning with prohibitions rather than first showing the students what they could do. Some students became hostile on the first day, almost by reflex. I said, 'You can't' and their bodies responded, 'I will.' These rules became challenges to battle, rather than accepted conditions for mutual survival. It took several weeks to overcome that negative note. Since then I introduce the students to the possibilities offered in the class—to the activity centers, to what I know, to different games and materials. Then I explain the rules as conditions necessary to allow things to be done."

Three aspects of discipline

Many labels have been stitched on to the various approaches to classroom discipline: interactive/interpersonal . . . problem solving . . . instructional . . . behaviorism . . . behaviorism/punishment . . . and others. Though differing in detail, all tend to focus on three fundamental concepts: prevention, understanding, and correction.

Prevention could fill a book. It's all those things a teacher should do to make the classroom environment pleasant and conducive to learning—things like improving student self-concepts, using effective teaching strategies, fostering positive peer relationships and positive teacher-student relationships, and carefully explaining the rules for maintaining that environment. The fact is that the more enjoyable and positive the classroom experience, the less need there will be for correction as a way of achieving discipline. Face it, if a class is boring, students will be disruptive; they know that their time is being wasted. Discipline problems thereby become inevitable, since the struggle for power, attention, and dominance becomes more interesting than the learning process.

Understanding might be considered an aspect of prevention. In any case, it must be mutual. The teacher must comprehend student needs—personal and academic—and the students must grasp the reasons for the teacher's insistence on cooperation and appropriate classroom behavior. That combination requires working at. Still, thousands and thousands of classrooms are marked by sustained orderliness. It can be done.

Correction is the court of last resort, to be used when understanding and prevention fail. And note that the word here is "correction," not "punishment." Punishment as a consistently used disciplinary tool not only adds up to failure to be effective in the areas of prevention and understanding but quickly leads to a level of antagonism and hostility that virtually defies resolution. Correction usually involves using resource people (including you as principal), working with parents, and trying a variety of problem-solving approaches with students.

A final word

What seems to work best at the elementary and middle school levels is a combination of positive reinforcement and limit setting. The problem with that combination, writes one observer, is that the pot of rewards needs to be pretty big and pretty full. And it needs constant stirring, so that the same students are not always receiving the same rewards—leading to satiation for some and a feeling of resignation for most.

Sam Foster offers a good concluding note: "Basically, we try to develop a school that is a place where people can live and grow with one another. In the long run, everything we do is centered around how we treat other people. In that sense, everything we do in the classroom is connected with discipline."

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